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MY FRIEND THE KING.

I BELIEVE I am the only man in the United States who has interviewed the King of Dahomey.

The circumstances were these :

Some years ago it was my fate to be appointed supercargo of a fine brig, clearing from New York for Sierra Leone, sometimes known as Freetown, on the west coast of Africa, or a market, which means that we were bound on a trading voyage, and had a cargo suitable, consisting of calicos, cotton cloth, muskets, gunpowder, beads, tobacco, whiskey, and knick-knacks.

We stopped twelve hours at Freetown and two days at Cape Coast Castle, a desolate, dreary spot, made celebrated by being the tomb of Letetia E. Landon, the English poetess.

After a passage of forty-five days we made the port of Whydah, on the coast of that unexplored land where the missionary has not yet reached, Dahomey. Here, from all the information I had received, I determined to get rid of my cargo, but here I was deceived. We who think that the slave trade is at an end, should look into the indications in that neighborhood now.

Where they are shipped to no one seems to know, but that there are cargoes of captives run off that coast yet to Brazil and the West India Islands is a certainty, and that there are hundreds of Portuguese along that coast regularly in the trade is as certain as that negroes exist there.

At the time of my arrival there was especial excitement. The British cruisers, which are still maintained on the coast, had taken a freak of running as close in shore as they could get, and firing, at long distance, on any building which they supposed to be used as a barracoon, or slave house, and in doing this they did not use very wise distinction between the barracoon and the factory, as it was called, being the building where the goods were stored

which were brought down by the caravans coming from the interior.

These goods were of great value, though not of great quantity, and consisted of hammered gold, of the very finest kind, ivory, ostrich feathers, palm-oil, etc., peculiarly agreeable to the trader.

The result of this promiscuous shooting was that the caravans would not come to the coast, and I could not get cargo. Just at this juncture I came across a little bustling, jovial Englishman, of the name of Evans, who was waiting at Whydah for a chance to get into the interior; and, after getting acquainted, he told me confidentially that he was bound on a mission to the King of Dahomey, though what that mission was he never would tell me, and was then awaiting the return of his messenger, whom he had sent to the King.

Evans advised me to join him, and go to the city of Abomey, the city of the King, as it was called, only one hundred miles distant, and a place of 80,000 inhabitants, and yet, strange to say, I could find but one single Portuguese half-breed Krooman on the coast who had ever been there, and what he told me only muddled my ideas.

Evans said that I could "get trade" there, that he had been there before; but unlike most travelers he did not enlarge. I understood nothing, but determined, as I could do nothing else, to venture on seeing that mythical being the King of Dahomey.

In a few days his messenger returned. He had a scroll in Arabic, which I was told by a Portuguese priest was pure, and which I can attest was beautifully written on good English paper, to the effect that the King would receive Mr. Evans, and instructing him how to reach Abomey, which was not by going north through Dahomey, but going east to the mouth of the Lagos River, which we were to ascend to a place called Dagbee, on the left bank, where the King would send an escort to meet us.

Now all was business. I put myself entirely into the hands of Evans, though the captain of the brig, a weighty Nova-Scotian, "Pooh-poo-ed!" the expedition, and refused to go along. Firstly, came the question of cost. We would have to take over thirty canoes and one hundred attendants—nothing can be done in Africa without a splurge—and it would be as well to be on the safe side, and take with me at least two hundred dollars, and he would take fifty. This money was to be taken in small English

silver and cowries, a little shell with a hole bored through it, and strung, eighty of them representing a half penny English.

To explain this, it is only necessary to come down to the labor idea to cover everything else. The daily work of a man is worth two cents a day, our money ; a woman's one cent ; therefore a man with an income of \$10 a year is independent and can live on the best the market affords.

The time came for us to depart, and we got away, with the whole population of Whydah literally throwing old shoes at us. We had no adventures to speak of until we reached the mouth of the Lagos, which we did in two days, camping ashore on the first night, and finding nothing sensational but the simple fact that the hyenas kept up a fandango fifteen feet below our hammocks all night, notwithstanding the fires. But they can't jump worth a cent.

At the mouth of the Lagos, we had a stop of one day. This was to lay in provisions, and look out for relays of rowers. I must give my best praise to the Portuguese, of whom I have spoken, and whom I had engaged, and to a Krooman whom he brought into my service, for their good business management. The latter spoke every language that ever was known, or heard of, including English and Dahomian, to say nothing of Ashantee, Ethiopic, and Arabic. His swear, in English, was simply wonderful, and his wages being twenty-five cents a day, he was, of course, a great man.

I shall never forget the passage up the Lagos. Talk of tropical beauty and poetry. Why it was a dream of the latter all the time. The clear, quiet, flowing stream, when you lean over the side of your canoe and look down at the fish twenty-five feet below, some of them good sized, three, four feet in length, and brilliant in color, taking occasionally an upward skip and coming almost to the side of the canoe. Then the soft, low song, if I may call it so, but rather the chant, of the boatmen, the language being a species of coast *patois* in which I could occasionally detect English or French.

Above our heads flew countless parrots and cranes of every hue, the latter dipping to the glassy surface, the former flying higher, and breaking the stillness with their cries, which, even in the untutored state, sounded like the human voice.

Along the banks were any quantity of monkeys, a small, nim-

ble breed, who chattered in a quarrelsome tone and appeared to be always in trouble, while the larger chimpanzee, the most intelligent of all the tribe, wandered singly or in couples, seemingly despising the association of his smaller fellows.

Two days it took us to reach Dagbee, a kroom, or village, on the banks of the river, as nearly as I could count, one hundred miles above its mouth. Here we met the escort sent by the King, consisting of twenty stalwart fellows of the purest black, grave as deacons, and called "sticks," a title which made them trusted and confidential emissaries of His Majesty of Dahomey.

The African does not understand rushing things, and the result was that, in spite of all the hurrying, we remained three days at Dagbee. To any one who enjoys the mere lassitude of life there was nothing to be found fault with; plenty to eat, of great variety, well cooked, and good, clean sleeping, in hammocks or in bamboo houses.

Here I met an English missionary, an Oxford student, and a thorough gentleman, who had been there over twenty years, sent out on an original salary of £100 per annum, afterward increased to £150, which was really a fortune. He was running a fine farm, with one hundred laborers, making sugar, which he sold on the coast, and was getting rich, but showed not the slightest disposition to go home. I was very sorry that I could not spend a few days with him, in which he promised me a variety of sights, among the rest a troop of chimpanzees, which he had trained as servants, not only for tricks, but as useful laborers. (Fine chance for an enterprising showman.) We started from Dagbee across what was called the Koosie country, to the north-east of which, not two hundred miles away, lies the little kingdom of Yoruba, the Sultan of which has been kicking up a row recently by slaughtering missionaries, and, the English say, eating them, which I doubt, as none of the inhabitants of that part of Africa are cannibals, even Dahomey, with all its horrors and its slaughters, being exempt from that, though accused of it.

Our way lay through a dense jungle by a foot-path alone. We had no animals, and our train consisted of ninety people—thirty of them women, who are there the beasts of burden and carried all our baggage, it taking ten of them to carry the money of cowries and small silver alone, weighing one hundred pounds. I was told that each woman must carry twenty pounds, but I would not

allow but ten. Through this jungle, with the cane sometimes thirty feet above our heads, we tramped on day after day, making from eight to fifteen miles in the six hours we traveled—from daylight, 3 A. M. to 7, and two hours before dark—always guiding our night stoppages by reaching a kroom, or village. These krooms are an assemblage of one to three hundred natives, living in bamboo huts, or on an opening beneath palms, and clearing space to plant yams, vegetables, and fruits enough to exist on.

Always when we left a kroom in the morning the whole population—men, women, and children—would start out with us, going as far as we would let them, until we drove them back. The noise they made kept us from seeing any animals, or many birds; and on the whole route, with the exception of a herd of antelope, a few nylghaus, or deer, we encountered nothing of note but a pair of cheetahs or hunting leopards, a trio of lions in the distance, and an aboma, or boa constrictor, which we killed and found to be eighty feet long—not, as Barnum says, “museum measure,” but honest American feet. Of this condiment I ate a hearty meal and found it good, and my guides devoured it eagerly.

I would simply say here that the women were good cooks, and I ate some of the most toothsome morsels of my life in Koosie and Dahomey.

On the twelfth day we arrived at the gates of Abomey, over a calculated distance of about one hundred and ten miles, and Mr. Evans sent a messenger to the King announcing his arrival. Ceremony and etiquette govern everything at Abomey. While the messenger was gone we took a walk to see the sights outside the walls,—we could not enter without the King’s permission,—and among the things that struck me as queer was a sentinel walking up and down before one of the gates, shouldering an ancient Yankee musket, with nothing on but a native made shirt of Yankee muslin.

He walked solemnly back and forth, not stopping even when the interpreter spoke to him, but picking up a round stone upon one side of the gate and depositing it on a similar heap at the other. That was the Dahomian city time, a substitute for clocks, and accepted as official. The next odd thing, among many, was the fact that wherever we met with a flock of chickens about the cabins the cocks wore a muzzle, which did not prevent them from

eating but did from crowing. This was by order of the King, who did not like a cock-crow, not being, perhaps, an early riser, and being disturbed with his three hundred and seventy wives too early. In an hour the messenger returned, three of the high officers of the King bringing his welcome, especially to the American, one of whom he had never seen, but supposed them to be of the same hue as his own subjects.

It must not be supposed that the present King of Dahomey, whose name is Bad-ja-hoong, is an ignorant man. His Majesty is conversant with Portuguese, Arabic, Hebrew, Ethiopic, Ashantee, and his own tongue. The Dahomians have schools, in one of which I counted eighty-four scholars, and the King has a reader, a native of the Mandingo tribe, who read French and German books when he could get them to him, translating as he went along. I had in my possession various books written by Mandingo and Foulah scribes in Arabic, as handsome as fine missals, on English paper, one of which, the Koran, was an exquisite copy.

We marched into the city through the main street, a hundred feet wide, and the "sticks" displayed most worthily their right to the cognomen by belaboring the crowd to open the way, with a vigor that augured badly for next day's heads. On the route, Mr. Evans informed me that the King had quartered us on Ah-dah-see-see, a benevolent looking old gentleman, who was one of the three messengers of welcome, and the richest man in Abomey, owning seven hundred slaves and six thousand head of cattle.

We soon arrived at the palace of Ah-dah-see-see, a house covering over two hundred feet square of ground without the court-yards, and built altogether of bamboo. Here we dismissed all our train, except my Portuguese half-breed, the Krooman interpreter, and a few servants, and were consigned to compartments where we received another messenger from the King and a present for myself of two Foulah girls, very light colored and ten years old, the age of belledom in Dahomey. The messenger told us that the King could not receive us till the following day, and Mr. Evans told me that I must not refuse the King's present, as it was the forecast of his favor, so I turned the two virgins over to the care of my Krooman, with instructions.

The next day, by another messenger, we received word that the King would be ready for us at high noon, and a little before

that hour, a messenger, another messenger, always a messenger—they have no postal facilities in Abomey—came with bearers and pole-slings. A pole sling is a long pole, about twenty-five feet, from which is suspended a leather seat and a board on which to rest the feet. You ride sideways, and with a man at each end of the pole, the motion is pleasant, and the pace for short distances about eight miles an hour.

Ten minutes, and we bounced into the vast courtyard of the King. We were given to understand that he then was in the privacy of his harem, which was established in an immense silk and velvet circular tent in the centre of the ground, surrounded by smaller tents, the large one being a present from Her Majesty, the Empress Victoria 1st.

Scattered about the grounds were innumerable gay colored silk and gold embroidered umbrellas, some of twenty feet diameter, all gifts from potentates, traders and wealthy subjects, who all, by the way, hold their wealth by permission of the King only, and I could not help feeling small that I, coming for, avowedly, trade purposes, had no umbrella to offer—not even a tent.

While we were examining all these, drums were heard—a thin skin of some kind stretched over the half of a dried gourd and pounded—announcing the coming of the King. The lappets of the big tent were drawn, and he stepped from behind a screen, a tall, well-built negro of about forty, dressed in a blue silk short gown, reaching to his knees, covered with silver half-moons, stars and quaint shaped spangles, about the size of half dollars. The Dahomian always uses silver for ornamentation instead of gold; the reason supposably being that Dahomey produces no silver, but plenty of gold.

On his head he had what we would call a smoking cap of red velvet, with gold lace, and the figures of a skull and cross bones in front. On his feet were gold-laced sandals, no stockings and no leggings. In his hand he held a sceptre of solid gold, surmounted by a red skull—the skull being the symbol of Dahomey—and thousands of them being constantly in sight on walls, roofs and posts about the city.

The King motioned, and we approached him, graciously permitted, as Evans informed me, as a personal favor to him, to do it in an upright position, instead of crawling on all fours, as we saw hundreds doing afterward. The King received us graciously,

scanned me all over, as I did him, asked a few stupid questions through my interpreter about America, which I answered as I saw fit, stretching truth to fit the occasion; and then he dismissed us with an invitation to come next day at the same hour, and he would hold a grand review of his Amazon army for my benefit.

Mr. Evans told him of the annoyance we suffered from the crowds in the streets pressing on us, and the King said he would stop all that, and then turning to his chief officials, issued a verbal order to that effect, which my Krooman instantly translated; in fact, the words from any one were hardly out of their mouth when I had them in understandable English from Kam-ki.

In this case they were quickly disseminated and rigidly obeyed, for on our return to our quarters, half an hour later, hardly a peregrinating Abomian could be seen, the few that remained in sight jamming themselves against the walls of houses, or throwing their bodies flat on the ground.

We slept well, on couches made of bamboo, and stuffed with scraped bamboo, with mats of the same material, exquisitely fine, and gayly colored, and we fed well on every variety of food, meats, game, fish, fruits and vegetables, properly cooked, as soon as the cooks could be made to understand that we did not want pepper, red African pepper, and could get salt, a scarcity, and all brought from the coast.

The next day we went to the market, where the chattering ceased in an instant, and the populace stood still and stared. There we could have bought a whole deer for half a crown—they did not take American money—and a nylghau, which is larger, for the same. Ten pounds, about, of not bad beef or mutton for two cents, our money, and a pair of chickens for less. Eggs one cent a stone, of about thirty—the stone being a weight of possibly four pounds—eggs, game and monkey in proportion, and fruit and vegetables so ridiculously cheap as to make one ashamed of them. A yam of thirty or forty pounds, one cent; beets, carrots, etc., in proportion. Grapes, pines, sour-sap, sweet-sap, alligator pears, bananas, and almost every kind of fruit known to tropical climes at two cents a calipash of two bushels, calipash and all, the calipash being the half or three-quarter part of a dried gourd shell, which sometimes holds as much as six bushels, though two

is the standard measure. A hearty man cannot devour more than one cent's worth of average food per day.

Of this abundance very little finds its way to the coast, the cost of transportation being tenfold its price; and the time consumed—ten or twelve days—precluding the possibility of anything fresh being carried. The farmers of Dahomey are very skillful, and the soil prolific, and I fear I should be accused of exaggeration if I should tell what I have seen; but I will tell of a turnip, or yam, that could not be got into an ordinary barrel, and a melon, of the orange species, over the top of which two men of nearly six feet in height could not clasp hands.

The next day at noon, our messenger and the pole slings appeared, and we were soon at the palace, where we found the King's guard, the famous Amazonian bodyguard, of, perhaps, five thousand women, assembled. They were divided into regiments or bodies of one thousand, only known apart by the silver ornament in front of their caps as the crocodile, the lion, the elephant, the leopard, or the snake.

These women are admitted to the guard on attaining the age of ten, full growth, and are given as wives to the soldiers of the King, of which he has twelve thousand, and are discharged from service upon becoming mothers of two children. As it is a privilege much coveted to be one of the King's bodyguard, and perhaps promotion to his harem, motherhood is not very much sought after. The uniform of these women is a short tunic of coarse cloth cotton, with a leathern belt, in which is stuck a long knife and a pipe, a cap of coarse blue cloth, and muskets of every conceivable make on earth. Barefooted, and barelegged, this completes their makeup, and their rations are sifted down to the lowest point that will sustain human life. One cent each to the whole army, as a gift, would be munificent.

The King received us in the pavilion, and put the army through its paces for half an hour, by word of command, in a way that showed they had received some sort of military education, most likely, as Evans suggested, from a stray Portuguese soldier, who had got to Abomey by chance, and got away by stealth, for it is dangerous to become useful to the King; he never is known to part with anything he wants.

The drill over, we were invited to lunch, and to our astonishment were regaled with champagne, sherry, cold meats, and tol-

erable bread, the wines being the gifts of traders, especially seekers for slaves, coming up from the coast, who always brought His Majesty some present.

For a day, or two, now, we had comparative quiet, and by aid of the pole slings saw much of the country, traveling only early in the morning and late in the afternoon. The white man, or even half-breed, never does anything in the middle of the day but keep quiet. To the north lay many small lakes and ponds, crowded with fish, as are all the streams; the jungle is filled with game, the farms—such as they are—teeming with produce and cattle, and food abundant everywhere. Some of these farmers run large plantations, and live in Abomey, like our host, Ah-dah-see-see, who was an educated gentleman, speaking and writing, as he told me, seven languages.

On the third day the King, in our honor, and to impress us with his great wealth, gave an exhibition of his gifts. These were contained in a building called the treasury, and at high noon—everything starts at noon—were brought forth by their bearers, numbering something like three hundred, paraded for an hour through the principal streets, and again restored to their domicile. The King does not use any of these gifts, unless personally requested so to do. Therefore, in the list, there were articles that had accumulated for several generations. There was a piano, a full-rigged brig twelve feet in length; there were French mirrors, into which his Majesty never looked, china vases and bowls, oil paintings of doubtful merit, and every conceivable article, including Yankee clocks and sewing machines, never used, to say nothing of trash without end, valuable because its use was unknown. After this I began to find time to devote to the purposes of trade; and as I was the first white man who ever came to Abomey for that purpose, the King afforded me every facility. If I had brought my cargo with me, I could have made it yield twenty-fold, but I was obliged to make my contracts deliverable on the coast, and so missed those great profits. While I was engaged on this Evans informed me that in a few days one of the “customs,” as the Dahomians call them, was to come off in the courtyard of the palace, and that I could witness it if I chose. I did choose, but I wished afterward that I had not.

These customs, which have existed as long as Dahomey has—they claim a thousand years—are of various kinds, and with

names. The one I was to witness was called "Throwing of the Presents," others, "Watering the King's Graves," "The Feast of the Troubadours," "The Day of the King," "The Milking of the Palm," etc.

The day came off. Evans, with a shudder, declined to attend. He had seen it the year before. In the centre of the courtyard a platform was erected, hung with silks, velvets, and flags, including that of Dahomey—a white ground, with a figure in black holding aloft a decapitated head in one hand, and a cimeter in the other. On this platform stood the King, surrounded by his nobles, among whom I had a prominent seat, while below struggled a mass of fifty thousand or more people, kept in some order by the woman guard.

The affair began by the King, personally, throwing into a sliding trench various packages of goods, consisting of cottons, clothes and cloths, knives, muskets, pipes, and tobacco, all of which were fought fiercely for by the crowd below. Then came the grand point, the slaughter.

The victims were brought forth lashed into boat-shaped baskets, in a sitting position, with knees drawn up to the chin, and lifted into the slide, from which they went down to the crowd below. Then there came a horrible scramble. Thousands, with long and bright knives, threw themselves on the victim, and in a moment he was hacked to pieces, as well as were some of his hackers, the victor being the one who came off with the head.

This was kept up for three hours, the number killed amounting to about two hundred, until the crowd below was reeking and smeared with blood. A more horrible sight was never witnessed, and it did not lessen the horror with me to be told that this is not a mere useless slaughter, as civilized nations suppose, but a day of execution, the decapitated being criminals, traitors and prisoners of war, who have been "offensive political partisans." It is the highest holiday in the year, and the only one where much slaughtering is done; and there is no doubt,—according to Mr. Evans—that the King himself wishes to abolish that part of it, but dares not. That night, perhaps as a soother to my nerves, the King gave us a serenade by his own private band. I was awakened about midnight by a noise that I can compare to nothing but a thunder-storm in scales. They ran from high to low, and got terribly mixed in the middle. It was not really unpleas-

ant, but, like the chiming of bells, should be heard at a distance—the greater the distance the better. I sprang to the window, to find that this band consisted of twenty-two men, each with a log, or piece of wood, the largest so heavy that it took four men to carry it. These were set, one end on the ground, the other supported by a wooden trestle, and beaten on the high end with wood hammers, of all sizes, from the hand hammer to a sledge, each stick or log emitting its sound, but no distinguishable air resulting.

After three weeks of varied experience, we departed from Abomey, accompanied to the gate by the King—he never leaves the city—and, it seemed to me, by the whole population of 80,000,—by their own census—to return to the coast by the Whydah road, a broad, well-kept highway, with many toll-gates collecting revenue for the King. Why we did not come that way was a mystery I never solved. We had horses to return with, but I preferred the pole slings most of the way. We reached Whydah in five days, stopping at comfortable houses every night. This being a cultivated country, we had little of adventure to relate, and the very next day my cargo began to arrive—palm oil, hides, ostrich feathers, ivory, gold in grain, and hammered trinkets of the purest and heaviest, one bangle for the waist weighing twelve pounds, and some of the workmanship beautiful. For one month I was busy night and day, and then sailed with the richest cargo ever brought from Africa.

For the Dahomians, I will only say, against all comers, that they are a kind, quiet, but brave and warlike people, industrious, as far as the negro can be, and domestic. England has looked for years on Dahomey with a watery mouth. For Dahomey she got up the Ashantee war and all the hobgoblin stories that are told, but she cannot seem to get in. Dahomey will have nothing to do with her, not even with her missionaries, and has remained as much an unknown country as Japan used to be.

J. W. WATSON.